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Problem or opportunity? A museological review of accessible museum storage

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ABSTRACT

A recent report by ICOM, *Museum Storage Around the World* (2024), highlighted that a vast percentage of museum collections in storage – sometimes as much as 90%. Increasingly, the discussions around how to manage these collections on a practical level are also engaging with the question of how to promote access to collections. To inform effective collections access strategies, this article takes a longer view, considering how storage has become so problematic for museums and what meaningful access looks like in the current UK museum sector. It also reflects on the current forms of museum collections storage through the lens of accessibility and suggests new categories for these spaces: Visible, Visitable, Researcher Responsive, Community Centred and Closed or Deep storage. This research draws on the findings from a UKRI-funded research project ‘Building Heritage Infrastructure’ which explored the relationship between community, locality and materiality in the museum storeroom.

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Introduction

‘Reserve collections’, ‘research collections’, ‘stored collections’, ‘closed collections’.

The question of how the millions of museum objects not on display should be cared for, kept and accessed has been a persistent challenge for the museum sector throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, through to the present day. The museum store is a special site built on trust between an institution and the public it serves. In 1979 E. Verner Johnson and J.C. Horgan wrote in their book *Museum Collections Storage* that ‘probably more harm has been done to museum collections through improper storage than by any other means.’ A truth that the British Museum recently experienced to its cost when it announced that thousands of objects had been stolen, missing, or damaged in its stored collection (British Museum 2023). This article will take a longitudinal view of the evolution of the perception of museum storage: from closed, problematic spaces, to debates around collections access and public investment. Finally, it will offer some

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reflections on some of the types of access available today: (1) Visible, (2) Visitable, (3) Research Responsive, (4) Community Centred and (5) Closed or Deep Storage.

In March 2022, following a decision by the ICOM Executive Committee and the resolution of the ICOM 34th Assembly in Kyoto, a Working Group on Collections Storage was established, spotlighting this as a key issue within the international museum community today. In the last thirty years, the public areas of museum work have been shaped by societal shifts rooted in postmodernism, postcolonialism, the adoption of digital technologies and emerging education theories. In the 1990s, in the UK, this new socially active form of museum was described under the term 'new museology': a field of scholarly research closely related to a new wave of postgraduate Museum Studies programmes.

[New museology] ... is a discourse around the social and political roles of museums, encouraging new communication and new styles of expression in contrast to classic, collections-centred museum models (McCall and Gray 2014).

Collections: acquired, documented and preserved within complex information systems, and kept in long, slow stasis, are often out of step with this more responsive museum model. They also sit awkwardly within a cultural sector that must increasingly emphasise its contribution to economic growth (O'Connor 2024).

This article considers the role of museum storage in relation to the evolving role of museums in society and the debates that have emerged in academic scholarship and contemporary practice. Drawing predominantly on examples from the UK, where collections care and the location of collections storage are going through a period of significant upheaval, as multiple museums embark on large-scale collections moves (Adams and Finch 2017). For example, in 2025 the UK Science Museum Group completed the move of 250,000 objects from their home in Blythe House, West Kensington, London to a new facility in the rural hills of Swindon, Wiltshire. Across the UK, new storage projects have allowed for opportunities for reflection on the purpose of collections in storage and how museums can begin to address the problematic presence of the reserve collection. This article was informed by the findings from a 2024–2025 AHRC-funded Research Network called 'Building Heritage Infrastructure Network: community, locality and materiality in the museum storeroom' which explored three different museum storage sites, two in the UK and one in Canada. Each of which exemplified the tensions that exist in the museum storerooms when addressing current aspirations for access and inclusion.

A renewed focus on museum storage also offers the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between collections access and use, within both practical and academic strands of museology. The influence and application of New Museology over the last thirty years, as well as more recent re-evaluations of the social role of museums, are predominantly illustrated by the most recent 2022 version of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of museums. Museums are no longer just custodians of material culture; they are also:

Open to the public, accessible and inclusive ... They foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. ICOM, Museum Definition 2022

How is this enhanced role articulated within areas of museum work that conserve and manage collections? The function of collections storerooms (closed, inaccessible,

unmediated spaces) seems to be the very antithesis of the contemporary museum mission, as this article will demonstrate; however, they also offer opportunities to become sites of lively, creative dialogue with our material culture. However, this aspiration requires imagination, resources and a willingness to reveal the often-hidden processes of collections care to the community museums serve.

‘Problèmes des collections de réserve dans les musées’

In December 1976, an ‘International Conference on Museum Storage’ or ‘Problèmes des collections de réserve dans les musées’ as it was also titled, was held in Washington, DC. The conference was organised by the International Council of Museums and UNESCO with the cooperation of the United States National Commission for UNESCO and the ICOM Committee for the American Association of Museums. The programme for the conference states:

The problems relating to museum storage have been of concern to all museum professionals, but until now have never been the subject of examination. Yet it is evident that if museums are going to fulfil their responsibilities in preserving the heritage of the past for future generations, far more attention must be paid to the conditions under which reserve and study collections are stored. (International Conference of Museum Storage Program 1976).

The first part of the conference included twenty-one specialists from Canada, the Federal Republic of Germany, Ghana, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, before it was opened to over 150 ICOM members. In the introduction to the 1976 report that followed the conference, E. Verner Johnson, founder of US-based museum architectural specialists Verner Johnson, wrote that ten years of his career had involved addressing museum storage and that he was ‘aware of the magnitude and universality of the problems as they relate to all types and sizes of museums.’

The conference discussed a range of issues, including advances in storage and information retrieval; problems of conservation and security; and how these needs differed between museums around the world. A key principle was that ‘[s]torage is more than a physical facility: it reflects the museum’s role as guardian, exhibitor and interpreter of cultural and natural objects and as a research institution.’ Many of these discussions would have been recognisable to a museum professional today, as they ranged from, for example, the management of humidity, to how to apply the latest information technology. Perhaps less familiar was the emphasis placed on ‘compactable’ or ‘high-density storage’ especially when the standard today has been that good storage is accessible storage. This article will return to this principle in considering current UK provision.

The 1976 storage conference made recommendations to museum professionals, including ICOM and UNESCO, establishing guidance, training and standards now reflected in much of our current collections management. One of the most tangible outcomes of the conference was a handbook called *Museum Collection Storage*, by E. Verner Johnson and J.C. Horgan and published in 1979 by UNESCO. The book takes many of the themes from the conference and develops them into clear guidance for the museum professional looking to improve their storage, covering principles of planning, access, security and conservation, as well as a dedicated section on managing the risk of fire within collections (Verner Johnson and Horgan 1979, 23). A review of the bibliography also reveals

numerous publications dedicated to different storage, and collection types, published in the mid-to-late 1970s.

Today, the subject of museum storage, its effectiveness and accessibility remain essential; however, unfashionable, to the mission of museums around the world. In a 2021 ICOM publication museologists Kreplak and Mairesse describe how ‘museum collections storage spaces and managers seem to have taken up residence in a blind spot’ in Museology. Mairesse established the ICOM Working Group in Collections Storage in March 2022, in part, to address this gap. A preliminary report by the Working Group considered the areas of (1) New Storage, (2) Open Storage, (3) Shared Storage, and (4) Re-Org (a system of reorganising and updating existing storage developed by ICOM in collaboration with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM)). As in the 1976 conference, the Working Group expressed concern that a ‘[l]arge number of museums around the world display only a very minimal percentage of the total collection.’

In 2024 a second international conference on museum storage was organised, this time in Paris. The themes of the two conferences, separated by nearly 50 years, show how little the discussions around museum storage have moved on. Questions around space, access and long-term preservation remain inextricably woven into the physical and conceptual spaces of the storeroom. Yet, as the next section explores, the pace at which museums in the UK continue to collect has dramatically reduced. So why are museum stores still seen as problematic?

New museology and reserve collections

The term ‘New Museology’ was popularised primarily in Europe and North America in the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting a movement away from traditional, object-centred museum practices towards more inclusive, community-oriented and critical approaches (McCall and Gray 2014). New Museology has evolved in two ways, both of which have significant implications for reserve collections:

- 1) Influenced by social and cultural theories, especially postmodernism, critical theory and cultural studies, it has challenged the authority of museums as neutral spaces and emphasised the importance of context, narrative and the multiplicity of meanings associated with museum objects (Vergo 1989).
- 2) It heralded a shift from an emphasis on objects and collections to visitor experience and engagement. It recognises museums as dynamic spaces where knowledge is co-created with the public, rather than simply transmitted from experts to passive audiences (Macdonald 2006). For the influential Museum Studies scholar, Sandell (1998) this equates to a commitment to ‘inclusivity and the representation of diverse voices and narratives’ which in turn, ‘has led to more participatory practices, where marginalised communities are given a platform to tell their own stories.’

Practically, the evolution of the museum into the social institution we recognise today has had a significant impact on the work taking place in the public spaces of the museum, which in turn has shaped expectations of collections (Hein 2000). Alongside museums’ new purpose as active agents within society, has come critical examination of the

concepts of authority and authenticity in museums and who controls the narratives that museums present (Smith 2006). New Museology emphasises the importance of interactive and participatory experiences where visitors can engage with exhibits in meaningful ways, contributing their own interpretations and experiences (Simon 2010). In response to this greater engagement with the needs and views of audiences, museums have seen the rise of professional audience research and learning teams. Though what is perhaps less acknowledged is that this has also led to feelings of anxiety as traditional methods of research, curation and collections management have seemingly been displaced or deprioritised. The influence of the academisation of museum practice was noted with some concern in 2010 by Stephen Deuchar, the Director of the Art Fund and Paul Ramsbottom, Chief Executive of the Wolfson Foundation.

The rise of museum studies, much of its output influenced by the writings of Foucault, has undermined the historic claims of museums and galleries to be disinterested and altruistic organisations, purveying objective information and authoritative knowledge about their collections to an appropriately admiring and credulous public. Instead, they are now regarded in some quarters as sinister citadels of power where knowledge is deliberately manipulated, so as to present and interpret their collections from one particular perspective, thereby shutting out multiple voices and occluding alternative views. And in our postcolonial world, the comprehensive collections that have been accumulated by self-styled 'encyclopaedic museums' are now routinely denounced as unacceptable displays of outmoded imperial acquisitiveness. (Deuchar and Ramsbottom in Cannadine 2018, pp. 21–22)

This critique of the authority of museums 'as sinister citadels of power' has also called into question not just the interpretation of many, particularly European and North American museum collections, but their provenance. In recent years, there has been a growth in movements advocating for the decolonisation of museums, the repatriation of artefacts, and the representation of indigenous and non-Western cultures in ways that are respectful and collaborative (Brown and Peers 2005; Hicks 2020). Thus, in recent years the UK, for example, has seen a wealth of museum-based research projects, seeking to understand, interpret and reunite their collections with source communities.

The application of New Museological ways of thinking also coincided with the development of new technologies as we have moved into a digital age. In museums, digital tools are used to enhance visitor engagement, provide access to collections, and create new opportunities for interactive learning (Parry 2007). In digital spaces, museums can work with audiences and co-develop content. Such was the impact of so-called Web 2.0 technologies on museum practice that the term Museum 2.0 was coined. The Covid-19 pandemic, which saw the mass closure of museums around the world, sparked numerous reflective pieces about the opportunities for museums to reach into the digital space (Noehrer et al. 2021).

By the mid-2020s, therefore, we find a museum defined as 'accessible and inclusive' and 'offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing' (ICOM 2022). While there is much that is positive in these developments, Keene (2006) found museums to be 'entangled in ... inconsistencies and logical binds' at the start of the twenty-first century. She wondered if, in the light of social change, museums are doomed as institutions, floundering in the unachievable demands of the postmodern world. Though what is more likely is that in this period, what we have seen is a growing disconnect between what a museum could theoretically achieve as

advocated by academic writers and what it can practically deliver. While Museum Studies scholars have the time and academic structures to communicate their opinions on museum practice, museum practitioners rarely have the same luxury. So, while this is an article on museum storage, it also calls for a rethink of how we reflect on and communicate the knowledge that is produced through practice. What is the actual Post-New Museological world that museums have been quietly operating within over the last 25 years?

Returning to the focus of this article, what then does the move towards this more fluid, responsive, democratic approach within museums mean for the static space of the museum storeroom and the collections they house? Surely the 'logical binds' that Keene alludes to are more prevalent within the storeroom than anywhere else. Museums are asked to reconcile the requirement to be dynamic, accessible and inclusive within spaces and professional cultures that are designed to be the opposite. Let us now explore how the impact of this fundamental change to the concept of the museum directly impacted the spaces of the storeroom.

New museology and the storeroom

[F]ew researchers have thus far addressed the question of collection storage. When studying museums, humanities researchers generally examine their public faces (Kreplak and Mairesse 2021, vii).

Despite being the place where most museum collections are housed, the storeroom remains an area of museum work that is frequently overlooked, neglected and underfunded. This section considers attempts by practitioners in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to apply the principles of New Museology to the reserve collections and the buildings that house them. 'Museums, in their role as custodial institutions of the world's material heritage, must also acknowledge and serve two unique communities – our ancestors and those who are not yet born' alongside present-day museum visitors (Sandell and Janes 2007). Nowhere else in the museum's functions do the needs of these different communities intersect so closely than in the storeroom, prompting tensions around cost, professional standards and institutional priorities (Jones 2017).

In an editorial for *Museums International*, Marcia Lord (1995) explains, in relation to overflowing museum storage, how '[c]ompounding this problem is the dramatic evolution in museum presentation: not so long ago a much higher proportion of the collection was on public view than is now considered acceptable.' Lord makes explicit the impact that the principles applied to one area of museum work (exhibitions) have on other areas (storage). Similarly, 'in 2006 and 2010, most museums reported that displaying and interpreting their collections were their top priority, followed by education and outreach activities and local community engagement, but that conserving and adding to their collections were relatively low priorities – not because that was their wish, but because they lacked the necessary resources,' (Cannadine 2018).

In the UK, a left-leaning government arrived in power in 1997, ushering in a new era of public spending, as well as an emphasis on socially responsible and inclusive public institutions. New Labour's 'social inclusion agenda' when it came to culture and the arts has been well-documented. Scholars such as Tlili, Gewirtz, and Cribb (2007), have demonstrated how, in this ten-year period, museums were reimagined by policymakers as

agents of social change. In this period, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) supported a deliberate agenda of not just promoting more participation in museums, but also to reach out and improve peoples' lives through these experiences (Sandell 1998). The push for socially inclusive and responsible museums at the government policy level mirrors, at least in terms of timing, the advocacy for the application of New Museological theories within mainstream museum practice. Further evidence of the connection can be found in papers from DCMS such as the publication of *A Common Wealth: Museums in the Learning Age* that identify 'Museums and galleries [as] universal educational institutions of immense expressive power.' An additional bibliography in the second, 1999, addition includes a wealth of contemporaneous publications associated with New Museology, and particularly the influential University of Leicester, School of Museum Studies. Many of these texts continue to underpin Museum Studies MA programmes in universities across the UK, particularly in relation to the delivery of museum education and ensuring this agenda is carried by new graduates into the sector.

In amongst these sweeping changes within museums, the storeroom has remained stubbornly consistent. In 2008, the same Suzanne Keene, who feared for the postmodern museum and was a former Head of Collections Management at the Science Museum, as well as Head of Conservation at the Museum of London and, latterly, a Lecturer in Museum Studies at UCL, led a research project into the current state of museum storage. This research was supported by the AHRC, MLA, the Collections Trust, The Pilgrim Trust, and the Museums Association, and responded to 'the perception ... that museum collections, mostly maintained at public expense, are under-used as a resource' (Keene, Stevenson, and Monti 2008, 11).

Directly connecting the issue of collections access to government policy, Keene also refers to a 1999 DCMS policy document called *Museums for the Many*, which included standards specifically for 'providing appropriate means of access to reserve collections and stored items for the general public as well as scholars' and 'the communication of staff's knowledge about the collections.' In both cases, rather than the fears around security, pests, fire and building degradation expressed by attendees of the 1976 ICOM conference, the key problematic is that of a lack of public access to the reserve collection. Despite numerous initiatives across the sector at the time, Keene still identifies inconsistencies in the availability and types of access being offered by museums across the sector.

Keene's report weaves two areas of museum scholarship together: first the aspirations of New Museology as discussed, but secondly, that collections have a value to the public because they are in public ownership. Accessing collections outside of the exhibition setting was seen as being valuable to a range of different stakeholders: academic researchers, local historians, enthusiasts, creatives, educators, etc. In 2005, Alberti identified 'object biography' as both a theoretical and methodological approach to collections by identifying significant moments in an object's life through the documentation that surrounds it. This theoretical leap allows for a democratisation of the types of material histories that can be read into museum objects. It also allows for more than one history to be read into the object, as demonstrated by Brusius (2019) through '100 Histories of the World in One Object.' If multiple biographies, and multiple stories, exist within one object, this dramatically expands the necessary expertise needed to fully understand it.

In the storeroom, two very different, occasionally oppositional, philosophies of museum practice found an opportunity for dialogue. Keene's report was well received within the museum sector and beyond, but in the UK at least, many of its recommendations were never acted upon, as a period of austerity was ushered in following the 2008 financial crash. Across the whole of the UK, local authority spending on museums and galleries declined between 2009/2010 and 2019/2020 by 27% in real terms from £426m to £311m (Museums Association 2021). Back of house services, arguably, suffered the most with yet another report appearing in 2017 bemoaning the underinvestment, insufficient space and lack of public access that heritage infrastructure, namely museum storerooms, have suffered (Mendoza 2017).

Perhaps an unexpected development over the last fifteen years was the growth of museum-based research centres, which, in 2006/2007, for the first time, were recognised as Independent Research Organisations (IRO) by the government-funded Arts and Humanities Research Council (A Decade of Success 2017). As a report celebrating ten years says, 'These are organisations that are inherently public-facing, they are geared up for getting big audiences through their doors. The IROs have a unique role in bringing high quality arts and humanities research to a wider public,' (2017). In 2024, most national museums have their own research teams, committed to helping their organisations meet the need to better understand their collections and audiences. While this may have been a response to the changing financial and political environment imposed on them by the post-2010 austerity years, it has also had the effect of producing a self-actualised form of museum research engaged in completing novel forms of knowledge production that introduces a direct dialogue between past, present and future stakeholders.

This new form of research has brought a renewed focus on museum collections and audiences, and increasingly on how these two areas of museum work can be brought together. The mysterious forces that govern museum exhibition programmes, and the vagaries of museum funding have meant that public outputs have been less influenced by museum research teams than one would expect. Instead, the focus of museum research has been on audiences already present in the galleries or on collections kept in the less fast-paced world of the storeroom. Access to collections, for a greater variety of people, from university-based researchers to community groups, has therefore become a priority, as institutions are asked to deliver on the ambitions and promises of government-funded research grants. Most importantly, a research focus on collections and the museums that care for, and house them has introduced new ways of thinking about the interrelationship between these different elements of practice.

In October 2024 the ICOM conference, 'Museum Storage – Current Situation and New Challenges,' presented itself as the long overdue successor to the 1976 conference. While both conferences identify museum storage as forgotten and often problematic spaces, they do this in slightly different ways. While the 1976 conference identified inadequate storage as being the result of the physical environment of the store, this received much less attention in 2024. Inappropriate storage places remain a global challenge, but there are now clear professional guidelines, including the Re-Org methodology, available for collections management. The solutions are at least known, if not always practical or affordable to implement.

In 2024, public access was one of the greatest challenges identified and to reflect this finding, the conference concluded with a resolution to establish a new Committee on

Museum Storage, amongst whose tasks was to secure better public access to collections. As the next section will discuss, collections research has introduced new relational approaches to museum collections, which, when brought into dialogue with growing pressures on the use and ownership of material culture, reframes the way we think about access today.

Visible, visitable or responsive: what does accessible storage mean today?

Before we examine the various practical shapes that accessible museum collections storage is taking today, it is worth considering how theory, and particularly social theory, has shaped the way large groups of museum objects can be understood. Museum collections are often made up of thousands of individual objects, and natural history specimens can easily stretch into the millions. In the spaces of the storeroom, we encounter this collection on mass. Larson, Petch, and Zeitlyn (2007), in their work around the Relational Museum, a research project developed at the Pitt Rivers Museum, state that:

A museum is far from static. It is composed of a complicated mass of social relationships, formed between curators, administrators, collectors, visitors, communities living in different parts of the world, collections, individual objects, exhibition cases, labels, accession books, guidebooks, buildings, communication systems, and so on. The list is endless. The harder one looks, the more connections one seems to find. All these social agents variously interlink.

This research was focused on the relationship of the Pitt Rivers collection to the museum, but in this web of meaning we can also introduce the additional function of the storeroom. The store therefore becomes a network of relationships, rather than a single entity. A heterogeneous assemblage of people, processes, ideas, histories, cultures and materialities. Within the museum store these relationships become further entangled within individuals' own memories, sensory experiences and expectations of the spaces they encounter. Alberti (2005) discusses how, 'The museum [is] not a static mausoleum but a dynamic, mutable entity where specimens were added and preserved, discarded, and destroyed.' Pantalony (2020) brings these ideas together, introducing collections as 'depositories of diverse and often surprising knowledge' as well as the 'communities' and 'value' that can coalesce around one object. This mutability within the collections offers the opportunity to introduce new branches of meaning into the assemblage of one object's meaning, and then to make new connections within the material network of the store (see also Latour 2023; Law 2002). Hence, emerging critical theories around Queering the Museum, Critical Fabulation and Participatory Research Practice, have become fashionable within Museum Studies, introducing new branches of meaning and identifying previously overlooked connections.

What does this mean for museum practice? And how do theories of social and material networks help practitioners improve the functionality of the storeroom? The first response is to consider what function museum storerooms perform in museums today. For a start, few of these new spaces are actually called 'storerooms'; a term that speaks to immobile, passive spaces, rather than the 'active, multifunctional places' they are today (Alberti 2022). Instead, there are Collections Centres, Depots, Research Centres, Cultural Resource

or Heritage Centres. These places, which are often separate buildings away from the public museum's site, perform a different function.

Reading the museum through a Foucauldian lens, Lord (2006) inadvertently identifies a key problematic of the store: 'without interpretation, without representing a relation between things and conceptual structures, an institution is not a museum, but a storehouse.' A 'storehouse' 'is not a museum'. So, while we can consider these to be relational spaces, networks of human-non-human actors, they are unmediated, and uninterpreted. They rely on the skills, experience and confidence of the visitor to decode these meanings. Interpretation is therefore different from the static function that sits alongside collections in exhibitions or galleries, but it is an active, constantly evolving, very individual form of engagement with the collections. Every conversation in the store creates new pathways, and new meaning, but this is often transitory. A form of serendipitous exploration that is so crucial to facilitating better access, but that is often missing from present day manifestations of so-called 'open,' 'visible' or 'accessible' storage (Mutibwa, Hess, and Jackson 2020).

The recent ICOM Report 'Museum Storage Around the World' (2024) based on responses from 98 countries, identified two types of museum storage space: on-site storage and off-site storage. On-site storage consists of behind-the-scenes spaces in the main museum, often located in a basement, loft or other unused space. In the survey, these are often reported to be at or nearly at capacity. The solution to this problem has been a greater reliance on Off-site storage, a trend that Mairesse (2021) traces back to the 1970s. Around 44% of respondents described having some form of off-site storage, but that 'does not mean, however, that these buildings have been designed as storage spaces' (ICOM 2024, 23). Museum storage is often found in warehouses on industrial parks, former aircraft hangars and offices (Humphreys and Percival 2023).

The new Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's Centre for Material Culture in Cambridge in the UK, for example, occupies a former Cold-War Bunker. In considering the types of storage, the ICOM Report (Mairesse 2024) centred the architecture of the store, its functionality as a preservation centre, and its distance from its parent museum. While access and use are briefly considered, 'more than half [of respondents] (55%) guarantee access to their storage for researchers and the public – provided they follow a written procedure' (ICOM 2024, 49). However, this report does not delve further into the links between types of storage, access to those spaces and the institutional intentions in relation to public access. If the human experience or 'access' is centred in an evaluation of museum storage, then a different set of categories emerges:

1. Visible or open storage

A form of high-density collections display, often organised systematically, but without or with minimal interpretative labels. As Thistle (in Knell 1994) describes; Visible Storage 'combines two functions that modern museology generally considers separate – storage and display,' and is rooted in the democratisation of collections that took place throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Importantly, this form of storage is incorporated into the overall exhibition offer of the museum. In the UK, a pioneer of this form of collections display was the National Railway Museum's North Shed, that opened in 1999

and claimed it was ‘the first time in Britain that visitors were given freedom to explore a museum’s collections instead of them being hidden away in locked rooms.’¹ Though this too followed a North American trend: for example, the Luce Centre, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, opened in 1988, comprising ‘nearly two-thirds of the collection of American art’ on open display (Rebora 2005). Other examples of these hybrid storage themed exhibitions include, Sörmlands Museum in Sweden, which created new storage organised around a principle of ‘Narrative Storage.’ The storage of the collection was themed with ‘the narratives and biographies of the people connected to the objects’ rather than the existing categories imposed by the museum (Ostritsch 2023).

In recent years, two museums have expanded on this style of exhibition and centred it in the design of new storage buildings. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Depot opened in 2021 and claims to be the ‘world’s first publicly accessible art storage facility.’² In the Depot, visitors walk past a series of pods, arranged according to the conservation requirements of different collection items. The Depot worked with artists and architects to produce a beautifully designed glass and steel building, which is as much a part of the experience of the visit as the art collection it houses. Similarly, the V&A East Storehouse opened in 2025, offering an ‘access all areas experience of the museum collection.’³ Like the Depot, it too has opted for a design aesthetic that leans heavily on glass and metal, allowing the visitor to look across the public and working areas of collections storage. Visible Storage, as a form of exhibition style, is very well established. What is novel about both the Depot and Storehouse is the extent to which revealing the hidden processes of the museum is central to the ethos of new cultural spaces with object-rich displays.

2. Visitable storage

Visitable Storage refers to traditional storerooms that facilitate in-person access to the main collection (as opposed to allowing a visitor to view an individual item in a study centre – see 3 below). This can take the form of public tours that market the idea of giving visitors a ‘behind-the-scenes’ insight into hidden museum functions. Bond (2017) discusses Visitable Storage as not just fulfilling a museum’s access obligations, but also as an opportunity for self-exploration based around ‘serendipity, transparency, and wonder’. In the AHRC-funded ‘Building Heritage Infrastructure project’, the research team experimented with this idea further through a visit to Amgueddfa Cymru – Museums Wales National Collections Centre.⁴ Visitors were offered the opportunity to undertake a traditional tour and to a self-led exploration of the collections, the latter of which sparked unexpected connections for both curators and members of the public. In a similar approach, the London Transport Museum has been experimenting with more sustained public interactions with museological practice through a rationalisation project based at The Depot, its main storage facility in West London. The ‘Acton Access’ project has worked with community partners to survey, catalogue, and interpret a collections backlog in the museum’s offsite storage facility.⁵

Visitable Storage also offers the most immediate opportunity for income generation for museums, while supporting access to and understanding of the conservation of collections (Gallimore and Wilkinson 2019). Birmingham Museum Trust, Museum Collection

Centre holds over 80% of a collection of around a million items. The Collection Centre offers weekly public tours, charging £8.00 (£8.80 with Gift Aid) for adults and £5.00 (£5.50 with Gift Aid) for children and consistently sells out well in advance.⁶ To visit the Science Museum Group's National Collection's Centre, a public tour costs £27.50 for adults, though children are free and concessions, including local residents, pay a reduced fee of £16.50.⁷ The London Transport Museum Depot in Acton, West London, offers tours on Fridays and Saturdays, priced at £20 for adults and £11 for children.

Prices such as these have received criticism, but what they signify is the costs, both monetary and labour, required to facilitate access in these spaces. Tour groups rarely exceed fifteen people and require a minimum of two staff members to ensure the safety of visitors and the collections. Staff leading tours provide entertainment, information and customer service, as well as more straightforward logistical access. Gallimore and Wilkinson (2019), in their assessment of six museums' storage tours, found that '[w]hilst visitors did not attend tours for the purpose of interacting with museum staff, afterwards they found the guide one of the most enjoyable elements of the tour.' This same study identified a common experience for any museum professional who has led a collections tour: the interaction led visitors to offer stories about objects they felt a connection with. What is often forgotten in debates about collections access is the people who are needed to make these experiences not just possible, but meaningful.

3. Research responsive storage

As a minimum, most museums will facilitate researcher access to stored collections. A typical visit will see a (usually academic) researcher approach a museum with a research inquiry or specific items they wish to view. Then either the relevant curator or a member of the collections management or access team will arrange a time for the visit to take place, and the researcher will view the item. In Keene's 2008 collections storage survey, academic researchers were by far the largest user group of collections storage. The process can involve lengthy negotiations to secure a time and staff support to view an item. One of the most innovative aspects of the new V&A Storehouse is a new streamlined process that allows visitors to gain traditional research access to the collection called 'Order an Object' service.⁸

Beyond academic researchers, there are other users who require the close study of museum objects. Subject specialists, sometimes termed enthusiasts or hobbyists, bring specialist knowledge and practical traditions of working with historical artefacts (Woodham, Smith, and Hess 2020). They also often have an important role to play in ensuring there is a continued demand for access to collections, from physically gaining entry to buildings, to voluntarily cataloguing material (Haines and Woodham 2019). Richoux, Serota-Braden, and Demyttenaere (2005) also identify educational visits (universities and schools), commercial users (fashion designers, architects, professional photographers) and members of cultural groups as the visitor types who would be undertaking the close study of objects. Family Historians were also identified by Keene, Stevenson, and Monti (2008) as a key cohort of researchers, usually operating outside of formal educational or research institutions.

There are a variety of motivations that fall within the broad definition of 'research access' to a stored collection, and Richoux, Serota-Braden, and Demyttenaere (2005)

suggest that this form of access must be balanced against the needs of the collections and the museum staff. Risks of damage always increase when objects are moved or handled, and this is weighed up against the substantial benefits that researchers bring in terms of enhanced knowledge about the collections. Returning to storerooms being socially constructed spaces, researchers of all kinds offer the opportunity to introduce new connections into the collection. The next challenge for museums is how to incorporate these insights into the information that underpins the collection.

4. Community-centred storage

A related, if distinct, form of collections storage that has profound lessons for the ways in which Western museums manage access is Community-Centered Storage that prioritises indigenous knowledge in its collections care (Stevens 2008).

In 1999, the National Museum of the American Indian, a part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, USA, opened its Cultural Resources Centre (CRC). While the CRC is designed to perform all the traditional aspects of museum storage (conservation, cataloguing, research, etc.), it also incorporates Native approaches to handling, documentation and collections care. From the architecture to the way the collections and spaces are used, the CRC is steered by the Native American communities its collections belong to. Traditionally, these forms of access could have been classed as 'research access' but this phrase suggests a professional motivation, which in the case of source communities, does not reflect the personal or spiritual need to interact with culturally significant material.

Through cultural spaces such as this in North America, as well as projects in countries such as New Zealand and Canada, all of which must reconcile a history of violence and seizure of cultural assets from native communities, there has emerged a new form of collections care. Jen Shannon, Anthropologist and Head of Outreach & Engagement Planning at the National Museum of the American Indian, terms 'multiple ways of knowing' (Shannon 2025). The level of trust embedded in museum practices of this kind, takes us beyond being simply 'accessible' and into co-stewardship as a form of collections care. While often seen as separate from established discussions of museum collections access, there are lessons that can be applied beyond the world of anthropology and ethnography.

5. Closed or deep storage

Many millions of items remain in storage spaces that are inaccessible to the public. In Cheshire in the UK, records from arts and culture organisations are quite literally buried beneath the earth in a former salt mine managed by a company called DeepStore.⁹ While most deep storage is not as extreme, inaccessible storage remains a common feature of contemporary museum practice. The same challenges identified in the 1970s (lack of resource and inadequate collections accommodation) remain an issue for museums around the world today. However, sometimes public access is not possible or even desirable. Stores can also be closed because of hazardous collections and following an assessment of personal risk. Museum radiation stores, for example, are rarely publicly accessible due to the potential risk they pose to anyone entering them. However, even a

closed store consumes resources, and if a collection is kept but not used, by anyone, then who or what is it being kept for?

These spaces, discussed in order of accessibility, prompt us to consider whether physical access is always necessary or indeed appropriate. Within more nuanced discussions of ownership and use emerges a challenge to the debates of thirty years ago, when open access was an aim in and of itself. What the evolving picture of museum storage demonstrates is that not all collections are or should be treated equally.

Conclusion

The storeroom remains a neglected area of both museum practice and academic discourse, with a few notable exceptions (Brusius and Singh 2017; Kreplak and Mairesse 2021). These spaces are problematic, expensive to run and, as a result, perpetually under resourced. Away from the public gaze, storage is unlikely to generate public pressure or capture the imagination of donors to improve it. Yet this space remains essential to museum practice and therefore 'open to the public, accessible and inclusive' (ICOM 2022). It is unsurprising, then, that the new ICOM Working Group for Museum Storage, established in 2024, recognised 'the essential role that museum storages play in the preservation, study, and accessibility of cultural heritage.'¹⁰

'Accessibility' here is key. For a range of political, social, theoretical and practical reasons, as explored above, access has become central to the way that museums think about their collections. However, 'accessibility' also introduces a point of tension when delivering on the practical requirements of 'preservation'. Modern conservation standards still emphasise the long, careful process of maintaining the physical integrity of collections. Thus, in most of the categories explored through this article (Visible, VISIBLE, Research Responsive and Closed or Deep Storage) in the hierarchy of needs, objects still come before the people. Where we see this hierarchy being disrupted is in Community-centred storage as in the case of the National Museum of American Indian. Here, community members are allowed to take off the gloves, join the conversation about how to care for their cultural property and even advocate for its removal from the museum altogether through processes of repatriation. While the ethical implications of ethnographic collections present their own unique set of challenges, there is much that can be learnt from the principles of prioritising human connection with material culture.

In 2024, when the 'Building Heritage Infrastructure' project team visited Amgueddfa Cymru – Museums Wales' National Collections Centre with community partners, we explored the collections freely. Though in terms of expertise and resources, the visit was facilitated by two curators, a conservator and a member of the community outreach team. Together we learned about family histories, creative projects, school trips, caring responsibilities, and favourite museums, among many other topics prompted by the collection. The museum staff answered questions about the variety of predominantly social history objects their visitors were encountering. What were they? How did they work? Who made them? As well as: how did they get here? How were they being looked after? And how can we see them again? ¹¹

Museum collections contain complex webs of meaning, with infinite branches of social connection, but they also occupy finite (and increasingly pressured) physical spaces. Collections cannot grow forever, and what has not been discussed here is the sensitive work

of disposals being quietly managed behind-the-scenes of many museums. Nor the carefully controlled collecting procedures that prevent the influx of new objects into already packed-out spaces. Yet, in amongst these practical responses to a fifty-year challenge, an opportunity seems to have been missed: the connections people make with collections. The recent emphasis to really understand the provenance of collections through participatory practice also points towards a shift from the passive interactions of the storage tour to an active process of information exchange, creativity and democratised decision-making. To make this possible, there is urgent need for greater advocacy for the most important asset any museum infrastructure project has: people. Therefore, as we look to the future of collections, the discussion about access to our shared material heritage is no longer just about opening the door, but about inviting people into the intellectual spaces and processes that make up the museum store.

Notes

1. <https://www.railwaymuseum.org.uk/whats-on/north-shed>
2. <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/depot/plan-your-depot-visit>
3. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/east>
4. <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/groups-and-centres/institute-for-modern-and-contemporary-culture/projects/building-heritage-infrastructure-community-locality-and-materiality-in-the-museum-storeroom-an-ahrc-research-network>
5. <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/collections/projects/acton-access>
6. <https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/museum-collection-centre/visit/tickets>
7. <https://www.scienceinnovationpark.org.uk/visit-us/public-guided-tours>
8. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/order-an-object?srltid=AfmBOoqb11ZIT68CX13wgOzWqlHmdcR9ko548zlOEoDoUbL3io7hv5q> (accessed 12/08/2025)
9. <https://www.deepstore.com/>
10. <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-storage-a-new-international-committee-on-collections-in-storage/>
11. This case study is detailed in Hess et al. 'But it's not a museum!' What does accessible storage mean for tomorrow's museum? An international collaborative research project on access, interpretation, and community in the museum storeroom' in the forthcoming ICOM Museum Storage book edited by Mairesse and published by Routledge.

Notes on contributor

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